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The Fulbright-Moyers Debate

Even while Walter Lippmann was still complaining we have never had any real public discussion of the issues of our time, we have just had another brief debate, on a fairly high official level, over the conduct of the war in Vietnam and the conduct of American foreign policy in general.

It was opened, last Sunday, by the gentleman who has become almost the only member of the United States Senate who dares discuss foreign policy as something less than some sacred word from above, Senator Fulbright. He suggested, for Vietnam, that we stop bombing North Vietnam for a longer period than the four day interlude of last May, to give anybody who might be interested a really significant chance to try to open negotiations toward peace.

And Senator Fulbright delivered himself of a general opinion, to the effect that he thought the Defense Department might be having more influence on our foreign policy than the State Department, and to the effect that he thought the function of the CIA ought to be limited to gathering intelligence and ought to be kept out of the field of action abroad.

That was the opening round of the debate. The other side responded the next day, with Bill D. Moyers, President Johnson's able and trusted press secretary and alter ego, carrying the ball. The President, said Moyers, is still willing to halt our bombing of North Vietnam, but only when he has some indication that such a suspension of bombing would lead to a peaceful settlement of the war.

Press Secretary Moyers did not agree with Senator Fulbright that the Defense Department is playing the dominant role in deciding what our foreign policy is to be. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, said Moyers, is "much less of a militarist than some of his critics think."

That ended the debate, except that

there seems to have been a little further informal elucidation, from Mr. Moyers, of the way the White House now views the war in Vietnam. The New York Times reported this apparent elucidation this way:

"President Johnson is known to believe that the situation in Vietnam is improving and that, as a result of the increased United States military commitment there, the Vietcong forces no longer can be said to be winning.

"It is the administration's hope that once the Communists realize that they cannot win they will be willing to negotiate a peaceful settlement."

That was the brief flurry of debate, between the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the White House press secretary.

What the debate proved was that the Senator dares speak his own mind, and that the Johnson administration thinks its policy is winning in Vietnam and may be about to produce peace, in which case suggestions such as those from Senator Fulbright are completely unwelcome.

One can hope that the administration is right in its appraisal, for there is obviously no easy way for it to change policy and try anything different.

The one big question mark remains this: How does the administration calculate that a prospect of defeat operates differently on different sides of the line? Last winter, faced with prospect of defeat in Vietnam, the United States did not decide to negotiate or try to withdraw, but rather to redouble its efforts and even risk new world war rather than yield.

Perhaps, by this time, the military situations in Vietnam are reversed, so that now the Vietcong are as badly off as we and our allies were last February. It would be nice if the Vietcong should now act differently than we did then, and come to ask our permission to withdraw from the war, but no one, not even a White House spokesman, will believe it until he sees it.